

World War I: A bloody birth to modernism in art

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff

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In this July 16, 2014, file photo, children view John Singer Sargent's "Gassed" at the Imperial War Museum in London. Sargent, an American painter, spent time at the front during World War I. He responded with his epic testament to the horrors of war in 1919 with the 20-foot-long painting.

NEW YORK—In the summer of 1914, American author Henry James knew that something had been lost forever.

World War I was just two weeks old at the time. James was living in London. He wrote to a friend that he was "sick beyond cure" to have lived to see the war. He described it as "black and hideous".

"You and I ... should have been spared this wreck of our belief that through the long years we had seen civilization grow and the worst become impossible," he wrote. "It seems to me to undo everything, everything that was ours, in the most horrible retroactive way."

James died in 1916, two years before the war ended. The wreckage of World War I was worse than even James could have imagined. Millions were dead, empires were dissolved and centuries-old beliefs were turned upside down.

A Terribly Destructive War

Long conflicts destroy the worlds they began in. Few did so as thoroughly and as terribly as World War I, which began 100 years ago this month.

Among writers, World War I changed both the stories they told and how they told them. Artists in general produced great paintings, music and film. The war also led to many of the central achievements of an artistic movement, called modernism, that raised questions still being asked today.

“If you look at the 19th century, you have this whole notion of progress through technology,” says Jan Schall, an art historian at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri.

“What the war did was turn this ideal upside down. You had mass death through mass technological warfare,” he said.

World War I was unique for the art it inspired. It was also unique for the art’s disappointment with war itself. Winners and losers both despaired.

Killing The Dream

Adam Kirsch, an essayist, says poetry had a history dating back to ancient Greece of treating war as a tragic, but essential proving ground. World War I broke the spell.

Kirsch wrote that wars today are justified on the grounds of self-defense or human rights, “never on the grounds that war itself is a splendid achievement or the true calling of men.”

Poets and writers on both sides of the Atlantic at first cheered on the battle. Carl Sandburg’s “Four Brothers” hailed the “Ballplayers, lumberjacks, ironworkers, ready in khaki / A million, ten million, singing, ‘I am ready.’” The war destroyed the dream.

American painter John Singer Sargent spent time at the front. His 20-foot-long painting “Gassed” shows blinded soldiers forming a procession. A gas attack had burned their eyes.

T.S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” sketches a ravaged, barren landscape:

In this valley of dying stars

In this hollow valley

This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

In this last of meeting places

We grope together

And avoid speech

Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

Soldiers returned injured, traumatized and bewildered. Writer Gertrude Stein called these soldiers a “lost generation.” Erich Maria Remarque wrote a famous anti-war novel called “All Quiet On the Western Front” about a German soldier who rejects patriotism and loses his humanity. He is killed on a day when all was quiet in the trenches.

No One Wants To Hear

Ernest Hemingway’s short story “Soldier’s Home” tells of a veteran named Krebs who finds that no one in his community wants to hear what really happened over there.

“Krebs found that to be listened to at all he had to lie and after he had done this twice he, too, had a reaction against the war and against talking about it,” Hemingway wrote. “A distaste for everything that had happened to him in the war set in because of the lies he had told.”

The war was a severing of history. It justified the skepticism of modernists who questioned whether a book needed a beginning, middle and end or whether a song needed a melody.

“War proved that everything was temporary, fleeting, and the art world reflected it,” says Doran Cart, senior curator of the National World War I Museum in Kansas City. “And it helped inspire works of modernism because the war itself was so modern and changed how people saw their communities and saw each other.”

Ironically, one of the war’s most enduring images was a call to service, not a protest. In 1917, artist James Montgomery Flagg was asked by the U.S. government to create a poster that would encourage young people to join the military. He sketched a furrowed, red-cheeked man with a starred top hat and white goatee, the face based in part on Flagg himself.

He added a simple tagline: “I Want YOU For U.S. Army,” shortened in popular memory to “UNCLE SAM WANTS YOU.”